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AUTHOR Garnett, Mary Anne
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ABSTRACT

One college language teacher developed computer-interactive audiotape exercises for an intermediate-level class in business French. The project was undertaken because of a need for appropriate materials at that level. The use of authoring software permitted development of a variety of activity types, including multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and read-along exercises. The activities developed were on aspects of the French banking system. The steps taken in planning, creating, and evaluating the materials included definition and sequencing of lesson objectives, determination of appropriate exercise types, creation of a preliminary tape and diskette, pilot testing, lesson revision based on feedback, testing of the revised lesson on the entire class, and evaluation and further modification of the unit. The exercises were developed with consideration for the texts to be used and the students' anticipated response to the activity type. Pilot testing revealed flaws both inherent in the software design and created by the lesson's design. The significant amount of time and effort invested in creating the materials was rewarded by the students' enthusiastic reception of them. (MSE)

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DEVELOPING COMPUTER-INTERACTIVE TAPE EXERCISES FOR INTERMEDIATE-LEVEL BUSINESS FRENCH

by

Dr. Mary Anne Garnett
Associate Professor of French
Department of Modern Languages
The University of South Dakota
Vermillion, South Dakota 57069

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DEVELOPING COMPUTER-INTERACTIVE TAPE EXERCISES FOR INTERMEDIATE-LEVEL BUSINESS FRENCH

In the spring of 1986, I received a faculty development grant from the Bush Foundation to create computer-interactive tape exercises for an intermediate-level class in business French at the University of South Dakota. It is my hope that the following description of my project may be of use and encouragement to foreign language teachers, like myself, who are interested in integrating computers into their classes, but whose experience in using microcomputers has been limited. Although this paper deals with a specific language (French) on a specific level (intermediate), most of my observations are applicable to other languages and levels of instruction. My perspective is not that of an expert in computer-aided instruction, but that of an educator who, with some trepidation, has entered a new field of endeavor.

My interest in developing computer-interactive tape exercises was the result of both necessity and opportunity. For several years I had been confronted with the difficulty of finding an adequate textbook for teaching an intermediate-level (second year) course in business French. Most textbooks are designed for students in third-year French or above; there are few second-year textbooks currently on the market which integrate a review of basic grammar structures, desperately needed at the intermediate

level, into a business context.[1] Second-year students also need extensive practice in developing listening comprehension, yet tape programs are lacking in most intermediate-level texts. The development of computer-interactive tape units which present grammar review and listening comprehension exercises in a business context was a logical solution.

The opportunity to realize this project depended on some fortunate circumstances. Our department had recently purchased some Tandberg TCCR 530 computer-interactive cassette recorders for our language laboratory; we had also acquired our first microcomputer, an Apple IIe. Several instructors, including myself, had been able to gain some experience creating computer exercises on the Apple IIe, using DASHER.[2] This first experience with an authoring program taught me two valuable lessons: (1) developing computer exercises takes much more time than you think it will at the outset, and (2) having an experienced colleague or resource person to consult is a necessity for a novice, despite assurances by software advertisers of the "user friendliness" of their product.

For the foreign language educator without programming skills who wishes to create computer-interactive exercises with an audio component, the immediate problem is finding suitable software. For my project, I was able to use IDI AUTHOR: A Multi-Lingual Authoring System then under development by Instructional Design

International.[3] This software does not require knowledge of a programming language, but it does take time to master and has special hardware requirements. To author a disk with IDI AUTHOR, you need an Apple IIe with Super Serial card or an Apple IIc with a special cable, 128K, and two disk drives. The student disks that you create can be run on the Apple IIe or IIc (with special cable) and require 128K and one disk drive.

The lesson you design is composed of frames or pages, each the equivalent of what can be displayed on the computer monitor at one time. For each frame, you may choose from a menu of five activities: presentation, multiple choice, read-along, fill-in-the-blank, and compare/contrast. Stimulus and feedback may be aural, visual, or both. You may also incorporate prerecorded tapes and other text and graphic files into the lesson. It is my experience, however, that the various activity formats in this program vary in smoothness of operation and potential for pedagogical application.

The presentation activity, as its name suggests, can be used for introductions to the lesson, directions to the student, and general prose. Each frame is 39 characters long and 18 lines deep, and, if you wish, there is an option for automatic frame advance. Unfortunately, the text editing mode in this, as in all other activities, is not sophisticated. Text does not wrap around from line to line; to make deletions or additions it is

necessary to retype entire lines, sometimes even the entire screen.

The multiple choice activity most successfully realizes the potential of the system to be truly interactive. When a student selects an answer, the recorder automatically advances to the recorded feedback for that option. If the first choice is incorrect, the student chooses another response, and the recorder again advances or rewinds to the respective feedback passage. A drawback to this activity, however, is the limitation of space for the written text. There are only nine lines available for both the question and as many as four answer options. For each possible response, two lines of written feedback may be included. These constraints can, at times, be frustrating.

The fill-in-the blank activity accomodates both single blank questions and multiple blank cloze passages. You may provide ordered feedback in which you give the student the correct answer after the third try for single blank exercises. A pedagogical flaw in this activity is that the size of the blank on the screen indicates the number of letters in the response, thus providing an unwarranted clue to the correct answer.

The read-along activity is extremely useful for sound/symbol practice. You synchronize a recorded passage with the screen display by inserting read-along stops into the text to mark counter values on the recorder. You may display the entire text

or simply key words or phrases as cues for listening comprehension. Learning to set and co-ordinate the counter values is difficult at first, but the system works well once you have mastered it.

In the compare/contrast activity, students can be asked to type in the text of a recorded passage or translate it. They are then shown the correct answer with which to compare their response. The screen provides five lines for directions or other text; the student has five lines to type in the response, and at the bottom there are five lines for the model or other feedback. Personally, I feel the educational value of this type of exercise is questionable. Much depends on the motivation and ability of the student. Students can easily avoid serious response because the correct answer is provided no matter what is typed in. Students who do take the exercise seriously need a certain degree of sophistication in order to compare their answer to the model and profit from the feedback.

The first set of exercises I developed with this software was a unit on the French banking system. In selecting this content area, I was motivated by several factors. Since I anticipated that it would take 3-4 weeks to develop, test, and revise a unit, it seemed important to create lessons that were not tied to any specific textbook but whose content area was included in most major ones. I did not wish to exert time and effort to create

lessons which might be obsolete if the next year I decided to change textbooks. The French banking system is a primary topic in both intermediate and advanced texts; moreover, its complexity makes it a likely candidate for the reinforcement which computer exercises can provide.

The development of this lesson included the following steps:

1. The definition of lesson objectives and their sequence.
2. The determination of types of exercises best suited to achieving these objectives within the constraints of the software program.
3. The creation of a preliminary tape and diskette.
4. The testing of this preliminary tape and diskette on a small number of students.
5. A revision of the lesson based on feedback from the students.
6. The testing of the revised lesson on the entire class.
7. The evaluation and further modification of the unit based upon feedback from the entire group.

My objectives in designing a unit on French banking were limited. The lesson was intended to familiarize the students with the various types of French banks and incorporate the

vocabulary of banking activities into grammar exercises that would give intermediate students practice in areas that pose some difficulties for them. Taking into consideration the types of exercises possible with the software, I designed a lesson containing three activities: (1) a read-along section on the French banking system which the student hears on tape and follows on screen, (2) a multiple-choice exercise to test comprehension of the read-along section, and (3) a fill-in-the -blank section requiring students to type in the correct preposition (à, de, or none) after a verb.

For the read-along section, I modified a short passage from Mustapha K. Bénouis' excellent Le français économique et commercial describing the various kinds of banks in France and their activities.[4] Sentences were simplified for second year students and the material was condensed for readability on the computer screen. The complete read-along section was composed of ten frames, each containing approximately 30-50 words.

The read-along section was followed by four multiple choice questions testing comprehension. The following is an example of a multiple choice question (with feedback shown here below each reponse):

Quelle banque contrôle le volume et le coût du crédit en France?

A. la Banque de France
Oui, très bien.

B. le Crédit National
Non, il finance les entreprises.

C. le Crédit Industriel et Commercial
Non, le CIC est une banque de dépôts.

D. le Crédit Commercial de France
Non, c'est une banque privée.

A fill-in -the-blank section of ten sentences using banking vocabulary and incorporating content from the reading passage completed the lesson. The student was to provide the appropriate preposition needed after the verb, as in the following example, which includes feedback options that I provided:

Le Banque de France a décidé __ baisser le taux d'escompte.
Bonne réponse! -- Désolé. -- Essayez encore. -- Mais non!

The first version of this lesson was then tested by having a student run through the exercises under my observation. A number of problems were identified. Some were inherent in the software design: for example, the size of the blank gave a clue to the correct answer. Others were flaws in the lesson itself, such as unclear feedback. On the whole, the student, although in the top quarter of the class, had difficulty with the exercises. The correct answer was chosen on the first try in the multiple choice section only 25 per cent of the time; the correct preposition was chosen only 46 per cent of the time in the fill-in-the-blank

activity. The student, however, was positive in regard to the usefulness of the activity, particularly the preposition exercise, and recommended expanding the number of items in both sections.

In my revision of the unit, I expanded the number of multiple choice questions to six and fill-in-the-blank items to fifteen. Other changes were made to clarify items in both sections. This revised united was then given to the entire class of sixteen students to evaluate in pairs using written evaluation forms. In addition, I tested the unit once again by observing an individual student run through the exercises.

The results of these evaluations held some surprises and convinced me of the wisdom of involving students in the development of lessons, perhaps at an even earlier stage than the testing. In general, students felt that the length and difficulty of the exercises in the revised lesson were about right. Their opinion of the relative usefulness of the various sections was, however, unexpected. They did not perceive the read-along exercise, a unique feature of the computer-interactive program, as particularly useful. In fact, two of the eight groups did not see it as useful at all and the other groups felt it was only moderately useful. On the other hand, the students were quite unexpectedly enthusiastic about the usefulness and, indeed, fun of the fill-in-the-blank activity. I suspect that

this is partly because fill-in-the-blank exercises are more traditionally found in workbooks and on tests, so that the students are perhaps more apt to perceive the "usefulness" of this activity in light of what they are generally asked to do. It is important therefore in the development of lessons to clarify for the students the reasons and objectives of the various sorts of exercises. This is perhaps most easily achieved by involving students in the planning and design of the lesson itself, thus fostering mutual awareness of expectations on the part of both teacher and students.

The most rewarding aspect of the development of this program was the positive, enthusiastic reaction of the students. In their written comments as part of the general evaluation, many indicated that working with the computer was fun. One group commented that the exercise on prepositions was "more fun because it seemed as we worked on it we were learning." Several groups, in fact, expressed a desire for more and longer exercises. One group made the following comment on the feedback responses that I was able to customize for the excercises: "Love the expletives!" The expletives, I hasten to add, were simply expressions like "Super!" "Désolé" and "Réfléchissez!"

Based on responses such as these, I would encourage you to consider integrating computer-interactive exercises into your classes, and, if you are creating your own exercises, to actively

involve your students in developing and evaluating them. To do so involves a real commitment of time and effort, and there are many moments of frustration. I think, however, that you will find the results well worth it.

NOTES

1. A recent exception is Georges Perla's workbook French for Business and Finance which accompanies his and Gloria Russo's text, Basic French Grammar (D.C. Heath, 1985).

2. An authoring program developed by James Pusack, Conduit, University of Iowa.

3. Now available from Tandberg Educational, 1 Labriola Court, Armonk, NY 10504. IDI AUTHOR includes modifiable character sets for all Roman-alphabet languages plus Greek, Russian, and Japanese, as well as a SONY videodisc interface.

4. Published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982. The Bénouis text is designed for third-year students.